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Basic Course Forum

From TED Talks to TikTok: Teaching Digital Communication to Match Student Skills with Employer Desires

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Abstract

Digital communication provides an important opportunity for the basic communication course (BCC) to match student skills to employer desires and enhance our curriculum in ways that match our essential competencies. This essay argues that digital communication can be public speaking and incorporating it into the BCC will enhance our ability to meet our core competencies and equip students with the skills employers seek. This recommendation is timely and critical due to the cultural shift of the COVID-19 pandemic and an increased community focus on the merits and costs of digital communication. Incorporating digital communication is essential to the continued relevance of the BCC and our ability to teach students the skills employers seek.

Keywords: basic communication course, digital communication, technology-mediated communication.

Employer Desires

Recently, a colleague said “I signed up to teach public speaking, not private speaking,” in a dialogue about adapting the basic communication course (BCC) to the COVID-19 pandemic. Similar sentiments are shared on social media. In this

essay, I argue that digital communication can be public speaking and should be incorporated into the BCC, then identify some ways that digital communication can meet both our core competencies (Brockelman-Post & Ruiz-Mesa, 2018) and provide students with the skills employers seek (NACE, 2020).

Digital Communication Can Be Public Speaking

Valenzano (2020) advocates a broadened definition of public speaking to ensure the continued utility of the BCC, which has long implicitly defined public speaking as traditional, live oratory. Valenzano highlights conceptualizations of public that include messages directed at a community or on topics of social or public consequence and speaking as “active intention to contribute something to an audience” (p. 113). However, instead of drilling down to a singular definition, Valenzano encourages discussion and acceptance of broader definitions of public speaking to “more closely hit the mark on what employers seek” (p. 119).

I argue that digital communication can be public speaking, especially when it relies on the same core competencies as live oratory. Online discussion forums, livestreaming monologues or dialogues, and asynchronous messages on platforms like TED and YouTube are public speaking when communicators develop intentional messages on topics of social or public consequence, even when interaction between speaker and audience may be mediated by time and technology. For example, a popular TikTok creator @epidemiologistkat uses the platform to create 60-second or less informative and persuasive videos summarizing medical studies about the COVID-19 pandemic for the general public. Her videos, which have more than 1.4 million likes (Wallace, 2020), fit the description for public and speaking outlined by Valenzano by sharing intentional messages on topics of public consequence with an audience. Moreover, defining public speaking in ways that include digital communication is beneficial for the BCC, as well as for students and for their future employers. To fail to incorporate new modes of speech like digital communication is a disservice to the BCC and the constituents we serve.

Employers Desire Communication and Technology Skills

Common BCC curriculum is designed to enhance communication, teamwork, interpersonal skills, and problem-solving, which are all attributes employers seek (NACE, 2020). However, the basic course does not emphasize technology beyond media literacy, with some notable exceptions. This is a missed opportunity. Employers identify technology skills, including digital literacy, social media use,

digital presentations, and troubleshooting, as an important attribute (NACE, 2020). Students and scholars agree digital communication is important (Frisby, 2017; Lind, 2012, Wolverton & Tanner, 2019) and shares many similarities with face-to-face speaking (Westwick et al., 2016). Moreover, technological skills are more important in a pandemic where physical social distance is best practice. In sum, digital communication is an important opportunity for the BCC to provide students with skills employers value.

In addition to meeting employer desires, digital communication fits within the six essential competencies articulated by the Measuring College Learning in public speaking panel (Brockelman-Post & Ruiz-Mesa, 2018). First, digital communication encourages students to create messages appropriate to the audience, purpose, and context by teaching students to consider speaking channel. Students already choose channels for personal interactions; we can emphasize the parallels for other communication contexts. Students understand ending relationships by unfriending on social media is different than by text or face-to-face conversation and channel is important to the impact of the message. Additionally, digital communication helps students develop sophisticated understanding of audience analysis. Students already adapt social media messages to their follower list and count, but may not employ the same analysis strategies they use for a face-to-face presentation. Helping students understand the costs and rewards of channel and their digital audience increases appropriate message creation and prepares students to use new channels at work, which develops not only computer skills, but also the written and verbal communication skills that employers seek (NACE, 2020).

Second, digital communication trains students to critically analyze messages, which match the analytical skills that employers want (NACE, 2020). Many principles of public speaking are consistent elements of effective communication across channel but require different methods. For example, I recently asked students to identify the ways that creators develop ethos, pathos, and logos on YouTube and TikTok, which helped them to consider these principles in more critical ways than only viewing traditional speeches. Critically analyzing the way channel or platform impacts message effectiveness can translate into the workplace, where employees will be expected to understand and adapt (another employer-sought skill, NACE, 2020) to messages.

Third, digital communication helps students apply ethical communication principles and practices. It reframes information ownership including both the importance of citation and the way students' work may become the property of

others. With face-to-face speeches, these concerns are low. However, with digital communication content is subject to ownership. Being attentive to copyrighted material can be especially important in the workplace, where the consequences of a violation may impact the employer and subsequently, one's employment. Additionally, recorded or archived presentations can easily be shared at a later date, sometimes without students' knowledge. This requires students to think about the long-term consequences of their words, such as being viewed by an employer. Furthermore, drawing students' attention to the way their information may be used by others demonstrates the importance of citation and provides new methods for sharing evidence, including hyperlinks and video/audio clips that bolster ethos and enhance technology skills. Teaching students to be attentive to the features of digital platforms and the ways those features can be used to ethically communicate enhances their computer skills and communication skills (NACE, 2020).

Fourth, digital communication enables students to utilize communication to embrace difference. Teaching digital communication identifies equity issues so students consider their audience in more inclusive ways. For instance, videoconferences and asynchronous presentations may offer captioning or varied listening speed to support accessibility. Digital communication can also help students to access a more diverse audience, especially at predominantly white institutions (PWIs). Students must also be prepared to interact with others in multimodal ways online, sometimes based on audience preference (e.g., one audience member may prefer to ask follow-up questions through asynchronous text while another may prefer a synchronous video chat) in ways that create speaker-audience interactions that are more interpersonal in nature. These considerations for supporting and responding to diverse audiences help students to engage in teamwork and interpersonally communicate with diverse others and enhance their written and verbal communication skills, as well as use communication to embrace difference and prepare for employment.

Fifth, digital communication empowers students to demonstrate self-efficacy. In my experience, students perk up when we discuss communication in digital environments. Many students' communication goals are focused on effectively sharing messages in digital settings, like engaging an audience via podcast or creating highly viewed YouTube content, pursuing these goals independent of the BCC. By meeting students where they are, we increase their initiative (another employer-desired skill, NACE, 2020) and self-efficacy around goalsetting and assessing

performance and highlight their existing skill for communicating in digital spaces, building agency.

Sixth, digital communication helps students influence public discourse, which connects to the leadership sought by employers (NACE, 2020). By building agency, we also empower students to influence. Sharing diverse examples of digital communication from TEDtalks to TikToks highlights the multitude of opportunities and identities affecting public discourse. Requiring students to engage in digital public speaking can also increase their impact by allowing the presentation to be shared with a broader audience or as part of an employment portfolio, further demonstrating their BCC-developed technology skills.

Conclusion

Digital communication provides an important opportunity for the BCC to match student skills to employer desires and enhance our curriculum in ways that match our essential competencies. Digital communication can be incorporated as a unit in face-to-face classrooms or used to frame online courses to help students think critically about the curriculum. Moreover, the pandemic and an increased focus on digital communication make this a timely recommendation. We must collectively agree that digital communication is public speaking and best practice for the BCC in order to match students' communication skills with the attributes employers seek and to prepare for our future.

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